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REQUIRED WORK IN LITERATURE FOR UNDER-GRADUATES¹

EDWIN GREENLAW
University of North Carolina

No one would maintain, I suppose, that we should take into our councils our pupils and ask them what and how much of our specialty we may have the privilege of setting forth in their presence. They would be embarrassed, and we should get nothing definite from them, only that everything is all right. With many, this means that they recognize that we must go through certain performances periodically, that we are quite capable of interfering with their normal and happy progress toward a degree unless we are treated skilfully, but that they also have their little systems by which they win the day. It is only when he is off guard that a wary college youth betrays much that is of value to his instinctive enemy, the professor. And there is one bit of college slang, familiar to all of us during the examination period, that forms a text for what I have to say. The phrase is "to get by." "*I got by Math. 1,*" says Smith to Jones, and Jones replies, "So did I, but I didn't *get by* English." This phrase, or an equivalent, we hear everywhere, and it leads straight to the heart of the fundamental problem in college teaching. For it means that in the eyes of

¹Read before the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, November, 1917.

students a college education consists in securing, unit by unit, a large collection of broken arcs that may indeed in heaven make a perfect round but on earth make an A.B.

For this situation, indicating as it does that it is only in theory that we may speak of college education in the singular and not the plural, we have ourselves to thank. A mass of college men is fluid; it will find any leaks in the container, and will reduce those guardians of learning who parade so impressively on Commencement Day to mere policemen through the rest of the term. Let us consider what it is that we do. We agree that certain departments shall be allotted a certain amount of time for required courses in the first year, or in the first two years. What these departments do with that time we leave to them, without regard to the wisdom of seeking a more complete correlation than is secured by the mere specification of requirements in English, mathematics, history, science, a foreign language. For the remainder of the course we merely specify that a certain number of hours, to which some people wish to give the ominous name of "student clock hours," shall be passed, i.e., "got by." Sometimes we try to get a semblance of unity by ordering that at least some of these clock hours shall be ticked off in the science laboratory, in the history and philosophy lecture-rooms, and in the study of a foreign language. We reach the utmost of our endeavor by further providing that in one of these divisions a student shall register for "major study," meaning, for example, two courses in each of the last two years. The results of our system are evident. From the side of the candidate for baccalaureate honors it means, first, registration for courses that come at convenient hours of the day. That is, he first decides at what hours it will please him to attend lectures. Next, he chooses, from all available courses, those that are given by a professor whose personality is for one reason or another agreeable to him. It follows as a corollary that a university is a better place in which to secure an education than a college because it offers a wider range for this choice of agreeable personalities. Lastly, he proceeds to "get by" these courses by means that are too familiar to all of us to require detailing here. Each course is his "bit"; he does his "bit," term by term, marking off the mileposts, often for-

getting the names of past courses but never forgetting the number of clock hours he has accumulated.

From the standpoint of the faculty face answers to face. In the required courses the departments are free to do as they will, knowing that the students must take their work whether or no. In the elective courses a more liberal policy must be pursued, the game being to get as many students away from other departments as possible. Now that efficiency standards are being introduced we may expect this tendency to grow. A recent bulletin from the Bureau of Education informs us that "the per cent of plant utilization results when the combined occupancy and time ratios are multiplied by the per cent of scheduled instructional space." Our problem, then, is to fill the instructional space to the ceiling. This is further defined, the "load" so to speak, as requiring a "departmental average of 300 student clock hours per instructor per week." Thus the culture of personalities pleasing to the man who is registering for his clock hours, with proper allowance for early hours, when the "load" may be supposed to be light, as against mid-day hours when traffic is heavy, will insure efficiency. We think, all of us, student, professor, survey expert, in terms of the factory, not of learning. The student is the laborer (I speak in theory only) who knows nothing of the thing he is trying to do except that he must "get by" a succession of factory inspectors. These factory inspectors, whom we call professors in order to make up through a dignified title for the failure to pay them the salaries of real factory inspectors, also think in terms of their departments; they do not interpret special fields in terms of the whole.

I set down these observations because I believe that it is absolutely necessary to take them into consideration before we attempt to define what work in any department should be required of undergraduates. Furthermore, I believe that my account of the situation is accurate not only in reference to the eternal warfare between instructors and students but also in reference to the conscientious students who do each "bit" faithfully and with some gleams of intelligence, and to the professor who abhors the thought of seeking to increase the registration in his classes. If Professor X is a charlatan, the system plays into his hand. If he is a devoted scholar

and teacher, his very love for his subject misleads him or blinds him. We need a General Strategy Board, made up of men learned in language and literature, in science and history, men of long experience in teaching, and with a clear view of what ought to be the total result of two years of a student's life at the university, whose business it is to determine not merely the proportion of time to be given to specified departments but also to define what is to be done in each department in terms of Freshman-Sophomore education as a whole. This we shall never have as long as we keep the foolish fiction about the freedom of departments to do as they please, so long as they don't offend the personal feelings of the trustees or the president. All this means, for example, that the problem of what work in literature is to be required, if *any* is to be required, is a question not merely for a department of English to decide, or for a group of teachers of English acting in association, but, for each college by a strategy board, and, for all colleges, by such an association as this one is or by a committee of the association including in its membership professors of science and history and Latin as well as professors of English. And this strategy board should have war powers.

I think that I can set forth this matter most clearly by asking you, first, to consider with me the various types of elementary courses in literature found in our colleges. There is first the survey course, in which the entire field of English literature is studied chronologically through an anthology of prose and poetry. Pupils are supposed to learn something about the relations of *Genesis A* to *Genesis B*, the old English epic, middle English dialects, the problem of authorship of *Piers Plowman*, the dates of Shakspeare's plays, the poetry of Crashaw. They read an extract from the "Moral Ode," and another extract from *Paradise Lost*. They name the types of sonnets, know who first wrote blank verse, discuss Byron's use of the Spenserian stanza, annotate and anatomize "Lycidas." It is a fact course, a Cook's tour through literature; withal, it is a most excellent examination course. It lends itself to the ambitions of young Ph.D's who pride themselves on their rigorous scholarship. It may be called the mental-discipline course. Churton Collins once wrote a book devoted to proving that literature is a

suitable subject for college teaching because it can be made as difficult as Greek. Out of such a theory sprang the whole noxious brood of editions with notes, encyclopedias of desultory information. I might name editions of "Lycidas," for example. Another illustration is the professor who boasted that he did not need to assign more than ten lines a day because he had accumulated so many notes that the class hour was fully occupied. But the place for the rigorous survey course is in the first year of the graduate school; it should be required of all candidates for the Master's degree in English, not of Sophomores who are going into law or engineering and have no interest in *Genesis B* or the authorship of *Piers Plowman*.

The second type of course is selective. Literature is regarded as a means for securing "culture." This may be called the finishing-school brand. It is suitable for young ladies' seminaries. But men study taxation, the history of political parties, and play football. Later, when they are successful lawyers, doing a man's work in the world, one of them introduces a professor of English to a woman's club with the announcement that "Professor X is now about to tell us of the beauties of the sweet bard of Avon." One form of the culture course is a course in literary masterpieces; it is better than the survey type in that it avoids over-emphasis of minor authors and works, but it is desultory, whimsical, unorganized. In another form drama, epic, novel, essay, lyric, are studied as types of literature. A semblance of method is possible because the "rules" supposed to differentiate the various types, or "kinds," may be isolated like germs of poliomyelitis. But such a course is a survival from eighteenth-century scholasticism, in which the worth of a work of the imagination was judged in accordance with its fidelity to the established "rules." We don't read Donald Hankey's *A Student in Arms* in order to find out what type of literature it belongs to, and when we read the profoundly moving poems in the *Treasury of War Poetry* we do not ask ourselves whether this poem or that is a sonnet in the Italian form or an ode of the Cowleyan form or an elegy. In the third type of course, impatient with the failure of scholastic methodology, we throw the whole mass overboard and become frankly modern. The *Review*

of *Reviews* should be studied because it represents English as it is written today; poor old Addison is dead of late. It makes no difference whether Shakspeare is understood or not; he may be read for sheer fun if one likes, but at all events one must know Harold Bell Wright, be able to talk about Amy Lowell, discuss *Damaged Goods*, and keep up with H. G. Wells. Both culture course and the study of modernity may be called the pippins and cheese method, by which literature is regarded as a sort of dessert. If one studies real things in the modern real school, one may have a little fiction, a little drama, even a little poetry, as a relaxation. Mr. Abraham Flexner rejects "Lycidas" and Burke, but he will permit the pupils in a modern school to read "for sheer fun at one time or another and quite regardless of chronological order Homer, Chaucer, Shakspeare, Walter Scott, Stevenson, Kipling, and Masfield." Mr. Flexner's chronological order is impeccable.

Now all these courses have elements of good in them, and may be effective if taught by the right teacher. But they are based on a wrong conception of the problem of teaching English literature in the Freshman and Sophomore years. If they are effective, it is not because they belong to one or another of these types, but because the teacher who conducts them teaches literature in spite of them. We shall be on much surer ground if we plan a course, not from the standpoint of the graduate training in English given by most of our universities, but from the standpoint of the proper relation of our course to the other work of the junior college and to the principles that should govern that work.

A simple way of defining the province of the Freshman-Sophomore period is to apply to it Carlyle's statement about the province of university training. You remember that he conceives it to be merely that of learning to read. "All that the university or final highest school can do for us," he says, "is to teach us to read." And is it not true that what we really wish to do in the first two years of the college is to assist the student to orient himself in the great branches of learning, the knowledges that make up the course: literature, history, and science. That is, we wish to train him to read these knowledges. At bottom is a certain amount of linguistic study, composition and the like; a certain con-

tent of facts in history; a certain training in some branch of science. But what we all really wish to secure is something beyond these elements—the adaptation of scientific method to present life, for example; the understanding, through investigation, of the meaning of history, and, as a climax, some comprehension of the authority of the poet as an interpreter of life, present as well as past.

Now this last paragraph sounds like a lecture. To get away from its dogmatism, let me set forth what I regard as an interesting experiment now being tried out in our required course at the University of North Carolina. I dislike to do this, because it suggests the teachers' devices that one finds in the pedagogical journals, a sort of "mothers' helps for rainy days" sort of thing, you know. But my purpose is not to describe a device but to illustrate principles; and the fact that we do not regard our course as perfected, but only as an experiment now in its third year of development, will protect me, I trust, from the appearance of presumption.

Our method of approach is through the conception contained in the sentence from Carlyle that I quoted a moment ago. Literature, for the purposes of this course, we hold to be a knowledge, the record of the human spirit, something to be apprehended intellectually rather than as a body of facts to be memorized or as material for aesthetic culture or as means for entertainment. Of course, it is also something else, but we believe that for a large class, made up as it is of men of every degree of attainment, with all sorts of family histories, and heading for all sorts of careers, the best approach is through putting the emphasis on the simple matter of reading. To talk aesthetics or philology to the mob of gentlemen who throng our elementary classrooms is to beat the wind. I do not mean that we content ourselves with paraphrases and definitions; that would not be to read, in Carlyle's sense. And we find that by avoiding aesthetic cant on the one hand and Ph.D. fact-grubbing on the other we are likely to build up a more intelligent and sincere appreciation of the imaginative qualities of great literature through this assumption that the poet has something to say to us and that our first business is to find out what this is.

With these articles of belief as a basis, our staff of teachers attached to the Sophomore required course, directed by Professor

J. H. Hanford, the chairman of the course, has worked out a plan of which I can here give but the barest outline. At the beginning of the year a number of Shakspeare's dramas are read, chiefly for their concrete illustrations of certain ideals of character, their exposition of the relations between the king and his people, their exposition of the national character. Several historical plays, together with *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, are the most important for our purpose. Incidentally, certain ideas about the Renaissance, supplementary to the study of history, find new emphasis. Bacon, some of whose essays are next studied, is a means of correlation with the study of science, illustrates keen observation of men and their motives from a point of view different from that of Shakspeare, and supplies material for testing the power of reading, in Carlyle's sense, unique in its value. Some attention is paid to the contemporaries of Shakspeare and Bacon, a syllabus being used as a guide, but the chief aim is to study the works of these two men as representative of certain important phases of human experience. This study of the English Renaissance is completed by the reading of liberal portions of Milton's works, with special stress on the first two books of *Paradise Lost* and selections from *Areopagitica*. In both cases it is possible to study certain ideas about democracy and liberty, while Milton's own life and his conception of the poet's function are interesting subjects. The next group of writers—Pope, Addison, Steele, and their circle—introduce criticism of life from a different point of view, more superficial, a comedy of manners, yet equally important. Comparison with Shakspeare's romantic comedy adds to the interest. Burns introduces the poetry of common life and the ideas closely related to our own Revolutionary period. This subject is carried farther through the study of Wordsworth, who, like Burns, writes of nature and the common man, of liberty and nationalism, but who brings back, in addition to the correlation with history, something of the philosophical element characteristic of the great Elizabethans. I have no time for more details, but merely to point out that our course gives most attention to the great authors from Shakspeare to Tennyson and Browning, involves a sufficiently large amount of reading to insure rather intimate acquaintance with these men, and stresses at every point

the ideas that are still at the base of our thinking. In order to assist students in their preparation of the lessons, questions are supplied for each author. These questions are designed not for purposes of examination but merely to show men what to look for when they study.

Only on some such basis as this, I believe, are we justified in requiring a course in literature. Such a course is not separate and distinct from a man's other work; it is rather an aid to unity. It does not deal with matter that is to be forgotten as soon as the examination is finished, but is to be applied throughout his college experience and beyond. Wordsworth called poetry the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, by which he meant not that poetry is superior to science but that the highest reaches of the scientific imagination differ only in mode of expression from poetry, a fact that may be easily illustrated by anyone who will take the trouble to compare, for example, Wordsworth's famous description, in the "Prelude," of the majestic intellect discerning unity and law beneath the flux of things, with Prince Kropotkin's account of his feelings when he had completed his study of the physical conformation of Asiatic Russia. The poet's imagination expresses itself through the same splendid imagery as that used by the scientist. I cite this as an illustration of one of the two fundamental relationships that we try to establish throughout the course, the relationship between poetry and science. The other is suggested by Shelley's impassioned close to his *Defence of Poetry*. "Poets," he says, "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." It is as legislators of the spirit that we are to study what they have left for us. The course in literature is a course in law—the law of conduct, of kingship, of democracy; the law of nature and of art. These legislators pass judgment on fame and glory, on ambition for a place in the sun, on frightfulness, on selling one's soul—or a nation's—to the devil of efficiency. They treat of love and immortality, of the religion that is in the heart of man. Their works constitute the book of the human spirit, a bible inspired by the heart of man, authentic and divine. The experience they set down adds to our experience; through it gleams that untraveled world which humanity throughout the centuries has sought to reach, and which

now seems so far away. But near or far, at the end of this war or not, its legislators are the poets. We neglect them at our peril. It is not here maintained that delightful days spent in reading for sheer joy, or the cultivation of the amateur spirit, or training in taste are not important in the study of literature, even in the elementary college course, but they do not of themselves justify our work. Such justification, I think, is to be found rather in the agony of a war-weary world. We must know what has been written in this book of the human spirit about the standards by which our scientific and commercial greatness is to be measured, about the laws on which human relationships must be based if mankind is not to lapse into barbarism, about the dreams for which men in all ages have struggled and died. When Bernhardt, the very embodiment of the soul of France, received in her hospital room in New York last spring the French mission to the United States, she said to them: "The sword of the soldier pierces the flesh; the word of the poet is still to dominate the spirit."